

## Conference Paper

# The Influence of Attachment to Mother on the Psychological Health of Pre-school Children

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## Abstract

The research of 97 children (49.5% girls) deals with the contribution of attachment to the mental health of senior pre-school age subjects. Child's attachment has been assessed by means of the Types of Attachment to Mother Assessment Questionnaire; child's health has been assessed by comprehensive health evaluation (with defining a health group), R. Sear's technique, Psychological Health Assessment List and The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. The ratio of pre-school children with secure and insecure attachment constituted 62.9 and 37.1%. Children with secure attachment had basic trust to mother and assurance in her support and acceptance. The obtained results confirmed the known data of the peculiarities of children with insecure attachment. Children with insecure attachment had a higher level of anxiety and a higher level of emotional symptom manifestations and external problems. The obtained multiple regression equation forecasted anxiety, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity and problems with peers according to the indices of attachment (emotional proximity with mother, mother's empathy and perceiving mother as a source of assistance and support). Mother's empathy to a child was the most significant for the development of anxiety, hyperactive behavior and pro-social behavior. The obtained results may be used in the preventive and correctional work on keeping and strengthening pre-school children's mental health.

**Keywords:** attachment to mother, mental health, preschoolers

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, scientists and practitioners who represent different areas of psychological science and medicine have been interested in attachment relations. For the last four decades, J. Bowlby's attachment theory has actually changed the psychology of development. Today, this area is unprecedentedly powerful in the intensity and scale of a particular topic of research. In compliance with the classic interpretation, attachment is defined in world psychology as an individually directed stable emotional

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attitude, which is based on the experience of affective relations between a child and a close adult (usually mother) [1]. Thus, the main function of attachment is rather to provide a sense of security than to satisfy physiological needs. Therefore, attachment is necessary for developing child's cognition and personality; therefore, it predetermines its mental health. J. Bowlby and other theoreticians have proved with certainty that early relations with adult caregivers are crucial, since they are the prototypes of further relations and contribute to further psychopathology, while secure attachment is associated with mental health [2].

Avoiding pattern of attachment is associated with externalization symptoms in adolescents, while the pattern of ambivalent attachment is associated with adolescent depression. The pattern of disorganized attachment is associated with dissociative disorder [3].

In the research of adolescents, 73.3% of participants from non-clinical group were related to the group of secure attachment, while in the clinical group, 13.3% demonstrated secure attachment. Meanwhile, the pattern of concerned attachment was associated with anxiety disorder, depression, borderline personality disorder; adolescents who demonstrated aloof pattern were more likely to have antisocial personality disorder, behavior disorder, alcohol and drug abuse [4].

This study is an attempt to investigate the influence of attachment on the development of psychological health impairments on the sample of Russian children.

The goal of this study is to evaluate the contribution of attachment to mother to the psychological health of pre-school children. The general hypothesis of research was that the type of attachment to mother affects the change of external and internal problems of a pre-school child.

## 2. Methodology

The research was conducted in 2016–2017 and involved senior pre-school children who visit pre-school educational institutions of Kostroma. The sample consisted of 97 pre-school children (49.5% of girls) aged 6–7 (mean age was  $6.6 \pm 0.6$ ).

The experts assessed child–mother attachment applying 'Child to mother attachment types assessment questionnaire' [1]. The questionnaire helped to determine attachment type and evaluated 7 indicators reflecting the significant areas of attachment at the senior preschool age: (1) emotional proximity to mother; (2) interaction with mother in a social context; (3) the perception of mother as a source of help and support; (4) acceptance of the child by his mother (conditional/unconditional); (5) the

need for the mother's presence; (6) mother's emotional sensitivity toward a child; (7) joint activities (harmony or conflict).

We have used the following techniques for the expert assessment of the psychological health state.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is designed to study popular external and internal problems of children aged 3–17 [5]. The questionnaire has five scales: emotional symptoms, problems with behavior, hyperactivity/inattentiveness, problems with peers and pro-social behavior. The scales of emotional symptoms and problems with peers form a final scale of internalization, while scales of problems with behavior and hyperactivity/inattentiveness form the final scale of externalization.

Assessment of anxiety involving observation (R. Sear's technique) aimed at defining the level of anxiety in pre-school children [6].

O.V. Khukhlaeva's 'List of teacher's assessment of child's psychological health' aimed at estimating the state of psychological health indices [6]. We have identified three indices of psychological health in O.V. Khukhlaeva's technique (E.V. Kuftyak's modification): a personal component, an emotional component, and a social component, which has allowed us to include different meaningful characteristics of health in the study.

The Spearman's  $r_s$  rank correlation coefficient was used to analyze the relationship between selected indicators. The criterion of Mann-Whitney allowed us to identify the differences between groups of samples in the level variables. The influence of attachment indices on children's mental health has been studied by means of regression analysis.

### 3. Results

At the first stage of our study, we have evaluated the type of children's attachment to their mothers. The questionnaire has enabled us to reveal two groups of children with completely different types of attachment to mother.

62.9% of children had a secure type of attachment: children had a close emotional contact with their mothers, interacted with them and perceived their readiness to understand and assist them. These children trust their mothers, they are not afraid of telling them their secrets, because they are sure in their empathy and friendly manner. In general, children with secure attachment have basic trust to their mother; they are sure in her support and acceptance and are not afraid to ask for her assistance in difficult and unpleasant situations.

The second group was represented by children with insecure attachment, which constituted 37.1% of general sample. It is found that these children do not have a need to ask their mothers for assistance when facing unpleasant and difficult situations and prefer to cope with them themselves. Children with insecure attachment rarely share secrets and difficulties with their mothers. The obtained results confirm the famous data of the peculiarities of children with insecure attachment [7].

Thus, these children show no signs of striving for the emotional proximity to their mother; they feel her uncertainty, non-acceptance and lack of support. Note that children with both secure and insecure attachment need their mothers to present. Children of this age possibly need their mother physically and emotionally; therefore, children from our sample demonstrate this need irrespective of the type of attachment to their mother.

Then, basing on the expert assessments of pre-school institution specialists (nursery school teachers, psychologist), we have analyzed the level of psychological health of pre-school children with different types of attachment to mother.

We have obtained significant differences in the indices of mental health in various groups of children. Children with insecure attachment have a higher level of anxiety ( $p = 0.001$ ) and a higher level of emotional symptom manifestations.

Differences in problems with peers ( $p = 0.003$ ) and behavior ( $p = 0.008$ ), and external problems are found in groups with secure and insecure attachment. Data are indicative of a high level of external problems or destructive deviations in the behavior children with insecure attachment to mother, which corresponds to lower results of development and adjustment and progressively reduces the forecast toward the future [8].

In compliance with expert assessments, secure type of attachment has relatively high adaptation, socially approved behavior ( $p = 0.03$ ) and relatively low general manifestation of behavior impairments compared to an insecure type.

During the study, we have also revealed correlations between mental health and its characteristics and indices of attachment to mother in different groups of children.

Growing anxiety of pre-school children irrespective of the type of attachment was determined by an emotional tie to mother ( $p \leq 0.001$ ), while internality and externality of problems in children with insecure attachment is related to mother's empathy ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

The obtained results show that children irrespective of the type of attachment are less anxious when mother manifests empathy to her child, his state, mood and needs. A secure type of attachment developed by a child is associated with a high level of

pro-social behavior ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). It is found that children with a secure type of attachment are capable of both assisting another person and expressing empathy to him. Besides, they address to their mother for assistance and support.

The group of children with a secure attachment demonstrates reverse correlation between 'emotional proximity to mother' and 'hyperactivity' indices ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). The obtained results show that trustworthy, open and intimate relations with mother diminish the symptoms of impulsive behavior in a child.

At the next stage of our empirical study, we have determined a regressive influence to reveal the indices of child's attachment to mother that are the most predictable toward the indices of pre-school children's psychological health.

Let us start with the regressive influence of indices under study in groups of children with a secure type of attachment to mother.

Thus, we have revealed that emotional proximity between pre-school children and mother and their joint activities have a joint influence on child's anxiety ( $R = 0.54$ ,  $R^2 = 0.29$ , at  $p = 0.023$ ,  $F = 11.803$ ). Thus, emotional proximity has a negative impact on the anxiety of a pre-school child ( $\beta = -0.420$ , at  $p = 0.000$ ), while joint activities have a positive influence on the anxiety index ( $\beta = 0.263$ , at  $p = 0.023$ ). Our data have shown that emotional proximity with a mother has a positive influence on child's pro-social skills ( $R = 0.31$ ,  $R^2 = 0.09$ , at  $p = 0.015$ ,  $F = 6.215$ ), and this influence is positive ( $\beta = 0.309$ , at  $p = 0.015$ ).

Regression analysis has shown that emotional proximity with mother and a need for her presence have a joint influence on the manifestation of hyperactivity in a child. Emotional proximity has a negative influence ( $\beta = -0.346$ , at  $p = 0.004$ ), while a need for mother's presence has a positive influence ( $\beta = 0.280$ , at  $p = 0.020$ ).

Then, we have revealed the regressive influence of attachment to mother on the indices of psychological health in groups of children with an insecure type of attachment. It is found that emotional proximity with mother affects the anxiety of children with insecure attachment ( $R = 0.88$ ,  $R^2 = 0.77$ , at  $p = 0.000$ ,  $F = 116.277$ ). Emotional proximity with a mother has a negative impact on the anxiety of a pre-school children in children with an insecure type of attachment ( $\beta = -0.880$ , at  $p = 0.000$ ).

It is revealed that such indices as mother's empathy and perceiving mother as a source of assistance and support have a joint influence on the psychological health index of children with insecure type of attachment ( $R = 0.67$ ,  $R^2 = 0.45$ , at  $p = 0.000$ ,  $F = 13.4$ ).

The manifestation of emotional symptoms in pre-school children depends on mother's empathy ( $\beta = -0.539$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), and the perception of a close adult as a secure source of assistance and support ( $\beta = -0.296$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ). It is established that the manifestation of hyperactivity in senior pre-school children with an insecure type of attachment depends on mother's empathy, and this influence is negative ( $\beta = -0.713$ ).

## 4. Discussion

Use as many sections/subsections as you need. The ratio of pre-school children with secure and insecure attachment in the sample constituted 62.9 and 37.1%. The obtained results confirm the famous data of the peculiarities of children with insecure attachment [1].

Thus, these children show no signs of striving for the emotional proximity to their mother; they feel her uncertainty, non-acceptance and lack of support. Note that children with both secure and insecure attachment need their mothers to present. Children of this age possibly need their mother physically and emotionally; therefore, children from our sample demonstrate this need irrespective of the type of attachment to their mother.

The analysis revealed some significant differences in pre-school children's mental health depending on their type of attachment. The obtained data show that children with insecure attachment have a high risk of anxiety and manifestation of emotional symptoms. Children with secure and insecure attachment differ in the manifestation of external problems. Children with unsecure attachment have more problems with their peers and behavior. Children with secure attachment are prone to pro-social behavior (attention to the feelings of other people, assistance and care).

Further analysis revealed some significant influences of the degree of attachment security and attachment indices on children's mental health.

The obtained results show that child's emotional proximity to a mother is of special significance for the important results of his development (pro-social behavior, self-assurance, lack of mental problems). This influence was found in some clinical studies [1]. The early study under the author's supervision has revealed that the demonstration of assurance in the secure relations of proximity by adults (mother, grandmother) who educate a child enable to develop child's dominance related to the need for trust and empathy in behavior [7].

Besides, this study has revealed that in case of a high level of emotional proximity with a mother, children do not manifest hyperactivity (it is within the limits of standard behavior), while a higher need for mother's presence provokes the symptoms of hyperactive behavior. Child's impulsive behavior probably makes mother manifest more attention and involvement in child's life.

Mother's empathy to a child is of special influence in the group of children with insecure attachment among the indices of attachment to mother. Anxiety, hyperactive behavior and pro-social behavior in children with insecure attachment reach standard values at the high level of mother's empathy. Besides, the obtained results show that proximity and good organization of mother and child joint activities affects the problems with behavior in pre-school children.

Therefore, the data analysis has shown that the quality of attachment to mother affects the psychological health of senior pre-school children. The revealed compensatory mechanisms, which enable attachment to become a factor of child's defense from ill-being and development, need to be analyzed in further studies.

## 5. Conclusions

The obtained results enable to make the following conclusions.

1. It is confirmed that child's attachment to mother actually performs the role of a genetic basis, different forms (types) of which set a special range of individual and typological characteristics.
2. Pre-school children attachment to mother has some peculiarities. The ratio of pre-school children with secure and insecure attachment in the sample constituted 62.9 and 37.1%. Children with an insecure type of attachment lack close relations with their mother and think that their mothers do not show enough empathy and attention.
3. Children with an insecure type of attachment show a high level of anxiety, emotional symptoms and problems with behavior. In children with secure attachment, pro-social behavior predominates.
4. The quality of attachment to mother affects the psychological health of senior pre-school children.

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